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ABSTRACT

Development of an intensive course in English which is offered to Dutch businessmen at the Netherland's School of Business is described in this article. The duration, scope, and level of the two-week conversational course are examined with particular emphasis on problems characteristic of this type of program. The author includes a sample program for the third day of instruction with a detailed description of the organization and contents of the lessons. (RL)

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Organizing an Advanced Course in Spoken English for Dutch Businessmen

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HOLLAND is a cosmopolitan country where languages are taught intensively in the schools and the bulk of the educated section of the population has a good command of English, German and French. Up to World War II, French and German were the predominant foreign languages, but, after the liberation, English swept into the forefront. The proximity of Holland to France, Germany and the British Isles and the fact that Dutch is a language proverbially unintelligible to most foreigners are among the reasons why it is crucially important for the Dutch businessman to know his languages. Practically every young Dutchman can speak English to some extent. Thanks to the huge influence of pop music, even the less educated youngster manages quite well, while many with a grammar school education behind them sometimes succeed in reaching the higher peaks of fluency. On the other hand, the older generations of literate adults, who often have a good passive knowledge of the language, are sometimes diffident about using it and feel hampered by their limited vocabulary.

FL 002 193

In 1965, the Netherlands School of Business decided to apply its language-teaching experience and language laboratory facilities to the organization of a course for men and women in business, industry and other professions who wanted to acquire greater proficiency in spoken English. The course was intended primarily for those who had attained responsible positions in their careers, but felt handicapped by their inability to speak the language confidently. The school was in a favorable position to carry out this purpose, since language teaching played an important part in its main task of training young men for international business administration and its language laboratory had accumulated a good stock of audio-visual materials dealing with predominantly commercial topics. A similar course was also organized for French, but, since I was responsible for directing the English course, I will confine my remarks to the latter.

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

It was important to establish beforehand what would be the duration, scope and level of the course. As business people are tied to their jobs, it would have to be as short as possible: hence, very intensive and based on a schedule extending from early in the morning until late at night. This meant that it would have to be residential, so that the participants could devote every available moment to practice and be mentally and physically isolated from their homes, families and native speech. It was estimated that the quantity of instruction could be compressed into two weeks, that is, two consecutive five-day periods from Monday to Friday with an intervening free weekend as an antidote to exhaustion. This proved to be a correct appraisal, so that the same arrangements were maintained for courses in subsequent years.

It was not easy to determine the necessary

scope of the course. Ought it to be restricted to purely business English or to be given a wider purpose? It was assumed that the candidates, consisting of experienced businessmen and other professional people, would have acquired a fair knowledge of current English business terminology already, but would be at a comparative disadvantage when having to express themselves in the wide field of everyday discourse. Therefore, we decided to expose them to the sort of English they would need to use in their jobs, especially when traveling, entertaining and conducting ordinary conversations, and to make the vocabulary as wide as possible, while excluding specialized usage. Fortunately, the materials composing the main courses used by our college students already satisfied these requirements.

So far as the level of the course was concerned, it was expected that participants would already have a good passive knowledge of English, but would need to convert it into active, natural and idiomatic speech. One of the main tasks would be to help them to overcome the shyness barrier. Therefore, a program was designed which started with a review at the lower intermediate level and, from the third day onwards, gathered momentum as it climbed towards advanced level. The work during the first two days would enable participants to feel their way and gain confidence from their existing knowledge, to learn the English names for the parts or speech and—quite a problem for the more elderly learner—to learn how to use the apparatus.

Program

As an intensive course of this kind depends to a great extent on individualized tuition, the number of candidates was limited to twenty-five. Those who took part in the first and subsequent courses belonged to the 35 to 60 age group and represented a diversity of backgrounds: business, industry, radio and TV, the learned professions. The daily schedule began at 8:30 a.m. and generally finished at about 10:00 p.m., with breaks for lunch and dinner and a 15-minute interval between lessons. Although nobody can really say what is the maximum time during which a pupil can profitably exercise at a stretch in the language laboratory my experience has shown that the fatigue limit is reached somewhere between 45 and 60 minutes, after which a short break insures a quick recovery. There were seven one-hour sessions each day: three in the morning, three in the afternoon, and one in the evening. The evening session was followed by a program of entertainment. Instruction was conducted entirely in English and participants, under pain of being dismissed from the course, were required to speak English at all times, also during meals and in social contact with each other. Admittedly, such a long working day placed a heavy burden on the participants' stamina, but, because each day's program was composed of varying elements, there was no problem of flagging effort. The following schedule shows how the use of alternate techniques solved the problem of monotony.

Program for Day #3

Session	Lesson
1	(a) Structure drills: MUST and HAVE TO (b) Spoken word: "Managing Tropical Rain Forests," vocabulary and understanding
2	(a) Dictation: "The Charter of the United Nations" (b) Pronunciation drill: The sound *θ* as in "*th*in"
3	Structure drills: CAN, COULD and MANAGED TO
4	(a) Structure drills: Question tags (b) Spoken word: "The Common Link—Speeches of President Lyndon B. Johnson and the late President John F. Kennedy," vocabulary and understanding

PROGRAM FOR DAY #3—(*Continued*)

Session	Lesson
5	Audio visual repetition drill: Samuelson's "International Trade"
6	Discussion: "To what extent do modern publicity methods influence the consumer's choice?"
7	Structure drills: Review of MUST and HAVE TO (Session 1), CAN, COULD and MANAGED TO (Session 3), and Question tags (Session 4)
8	Entertainment: Film *Fail Safe* featuring Henry Fonda and Dan O'Herlihy. Discussion of the theme

ORGANIZATION AND CONTENTS OF THE LESSONS

Since each laboratory lesson was aimed to keep the participants as vocally productive as possible, the taking of notes, in spite of some initial protests, was discouraged. The various types of activity need some words of explanation.

1. *Structure drills.* Together with the audio-visual repetition drills, these formed the kernel of the program, covering the principal grammatical and syntactic difficulties for the Dutch learner from the lower intermediate to the advanced level. Each participant was given a copy of "A Practical English Grammar for Foreign Students" by A. J. Thomson and A. V. Martinet (O.U.P.) and "Practical English Usage for Overseas Students" by P. S. Tregidgo (Longmans) and was instructed to study the night before those pages which were devoted to the subject matter to be practised next day. Thus, he had a broad idea of the content of each lesson before it began. For the sake of extra elucidation, however, the various structures were rapidly explained by the instructor at the beginning of the lesson with the help of specially prepared slides projected on the screen. This time-saving device replaced the standard procedure of giving a classroom lesson prior to practice of the forms in the language laboratory and is recommended to other practitioners as a highly effective way, when time is at a premium, of dispensing with classroom explanations. The individual exercises were of varying length, but there was always enough time for the members to work through the drills at least three times. Occasionally, permission was given for members to listen to their own recordings, although such a practice, in the writer's opinion, is of doubtful benefit. Each evening, an hour was devoted to review of the structure drills performed earlier in the day. Each could decide for himself in which particular forms he needed further practice. All he had to do was to select the relevant drills still on his tape from the previous sessions.

2. *Audio-visual repetition drills.* At least one session a day was reserved for this very effective method of improving pronunciation and intonation, enlarging vocabulary and increasing general fluency. It is a type of exercise which appeals to pupils of all ages and deserves to be employed more frequently as a standard technique.[1] The topics presented dealt chiefly with

[1] Although the average language laboratory will possess adequate projection equipment for mounting this type of program, the organization of the materials used and the timing of the lesson make the undertaking somewhat complicated. The following explanation is intended for course instructors not yet familiar with the method.

The basis of each program is a filmstrip, which has been cut up so as to form, say, 30 to 50 slides, and a tape on which has been recorded the text, if necessary in a shortened version, of the original filmstrip. Most American-produced filmstrips are supplied with captions which are an extra advantage, although not indispensable. The idea is to play the tape and project the slides on the screen by means of a slide synchronizer, so that the pupils can follow the captions while the spoken text is being heard through their headphones. The master tape contains two recordings of the text: Part I is a reading at normal speed; Part II is a second reading of the same text, but now phrase by phrase as an 'exploded' version. A short interval of possibly 20 seconds separates Part I from Part II to allow time for the slide cassette to be reinserted in the projector. The actual lesson is arranged in the following stages, for which sample timings are given:

factual subjects within the businessman's typical range of interests, such as Basic Economic Principles, International Trade, Building Societies and the Capital Market, The Story of Lloyds, The Retail Trade, Transportation etc.

3. *Pronunciation drills.* Exercises were restricted to sounds that give greatest difficulty to the Dutch learner, one sound being practiced intensively at a time. Four-phase repetition drills, extending from groups of single words via phrases and sentences to 'exploded' longer passages, were modeled on the system used in Clarey and Dixson's exercises.[2]

4. *Dictations.* Although dictations in the language laboratory are discountenanced by some authorities, they are useful in an intensive course as a means of developing audio-discrimination. The various passages were based on topical subject matter and became more difficult as the course progressed. Tapes consisted of four parts: (i) *Listen to the following passage read at normal speed;* (ii) *Now repeat the passage phrase by phrase after me*; (iii) *Now write the passage down as I dictate it*; (iv) *Now listen to the passage read at normal speed for the last time.* At the end of the dictation, the text was projected on the screen, phonological pitfalls were discussed and participants corrected their own work.

5. *Spoken word.* Short recorded passages of speech dealing with current affairs were introduced at the end of some of the more demanding sessions to allow members an opportunity of listening to other voices and accents: American, British Midland and cockney, educated African and West Indian, women and children. Members generally made a recording from the master tape and played the passages back several times, asking questions whenever necessary.

6. *Telephone exercises.* Thanks to its excellent intercommunication facilities, the language laboratory is admirably adapted to the organization of telephone exercises,[3] which allow pupils to indulge in free and natural conversation. It stands to reason that they appeal especially to business people. Although they require meticulous planning and tend to devour program time, they are one of the most stimulating and entertaining types of exercise, in so far as they not only encourage pupils to use their imagination and inventiveness, but also give them an opportunity of seeing how

Stage I (6–10 minutes); this is a preliminary showing of the program, affording the pupils an opportunity of grasping the theme as a whole, of listening to the commentary and the pronunciation of unfamiliar words and, at the same time, of looking at the pictures and studying the captions. (Background music, if skillfully woven into the commentary, increases the dramatic effect.)

Stage II (15–20 minutes): this represents Part II of the tape, the section intended as a repetition drill. The entire program—slides and recorded commentary (but no music)—is played again, but now the pupils hear the commentary in its 'exploded' version and proceed to dub the master recording (i.e. the commentary) on to their own tapes, at the same time repeating the commentary phrase by phrase in the manner of a normal repetition drill while looking at the captions on the screen. The instructor is free to monitor as he pleases.

Stage III (15–20 minutes): the pupil, who now has the commentary in 'exploded' form on his own tape, does the repetition drill for a second time from his own tape-recorder, but without the help of a projected text. He can now put questions to the instructor about pronunciation, vocabulary or any other difficulties.

Stage IV (5–6 minutes): the instructor now operates the projector by means of the manual control. This time, the slides are not accompanied by a spoken commentary. The pupil reads the original text (captions) at natural speed direct from the screen and records his performance. If the slides are changed at the right tempo, the pupil's playback will sound like a continuous passage of prose.

Stage V (5–6 minutes): the pupil listens to the playback. Afterwards, if he wishes, the instructor can single out good performances and let the class listen collectively to some fragments.

[2] M. Elizabeth Clarey and Robert J. Dixson, *Pronunciation Exercises in English,* Revised Edition. New York: Regents Publishing Co., Inc., 1963.

[3] The planning and execution of a telephone exercise are based on the following procedures.

A short scenario (perhaps in the form of a report) is written around a particular commercial or other type of situation, authentic or imaginary, which should be fraught with dramatic possibilities and will result in a sucession of telephone conversations as the story unfolds. *Example*: Van Dijk is traveling from Utrecht to London via Hook of Holland and Harwich and registers his baggage, which is found to be missing at his destination. From his hotel, *Van Dijk* calls *Continental Passenger Enquiries*, Liverpool Street Station, but is told to refer his complaint to the Continental Inspector. *Van Dijk* then calls the *Continental Inspector*, who blames the customs authorities, saying

much they have learned up to that point in the course and of showing off their skills a little.

7. *Discussions.* Like telephone exercises, discussions about given topics are useful for encouraging self-expression. At the end of each afternoon, members gathered in an adjacent room and, under the chairmanship of the instructor, spent 45 minutes debating informally such questions as What are the qualities that made a great statesman? How can education be geared to life and leisure in an age of technology? and To what extent should the privacy of public figures be respected? At the end of the discussion the instructor commented on individual performances and pointed out any mistakes that had recurred.

Difficulties Encountered in Teaching the Older Learner

The underlying object of the course was to lead members "who already had a command of English at the intermediate stage" as far as possible towards a standard of near-native proficiency. In the initial course held in 1967, results fell a long way short of this specified end. The failure was due to unsatisfactory selection procedure. In order for such a course to succeed, it is essential for those selected to have reached approximately the same standard of knowledge at the outset, so that they stand a better chance of making headway as a group without being hindered by stragglers. Instead, candidates were accepted on the basis of a personal declaration concerning their ability "to read/write/speak English (please check)". This unreliable method of selection resulted in an extremely motley group, consisting of those who were far ahead of the others, those who had the appropriate qualifications and those who, having underestimated the difficulty of the course, were always panting behind. The following year, however, applicants were subjected to thorough pre-testing to satisfy the need for homogeneity, a precaution which enabled everybody to start at the same level and clear each hurdle successfully. Notwithstanding, the experience of teaching older (or elderly) learners in an intensive audio-lingual course of this type brought to the surface certain problems which do not generally affect younger age groups. First, allowances have to be made for the fact that people who left school or college ten, twenty or thirty years earlier tend to be bewildered initially by language laboratory equipment and techniques. A youngster is able to operate a tape-recorder within a few minutes, whereas a middle-aged person takes a considerable time to master the "knob-pressing." Secondly, the latter is inclined to view with suspicion the "slick" tempo which typifies audio-visual techniques of instruction. Thirdly, the linguistically unsophisticated adult, who has been used to wrestling with more concrete problems in his job, has often lost his sensitivity to language refinements and has to attune himself anew to the necessity of thinking in abstract terms and developing his perception of linguistic nuances. Therefore, on the first day of each course, it was always necessary to allow members adequate settling-in time, to put them at their, ease, to explain to them the techniques to be employed, and to give them practice in handling their tape-recorders. Fourthly, there is the problem of linguistic terminology. At this intermediate to advanced level, there quickly comes a time when aspects of sentence construction have to be explained. Consequently, the parts of speech and their functions have to be retaught, otherwise all explanations will be meaningless.

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that . . . etc. *Van Dijk* next calls the Waterguard Office, Customs and Excise Department and is put through to the *Duty Officer*, who promises to investigate. The *Duty Officer* duly calls *Van Dijk* back and denies . . . etc. *Van Dijk* again calls the *Continental Inspector*, who now confirms that . . . etc. This synopsis provides five conversations for ten players, who are grouped into suitable pairs. The night before the exercise takes place, the various partners are told to rehearse their particular telephone conversation, but not to write it down. During the exercise proper, the partners are connected through the intercommunication system and each conversation takes place in accordance with the directions in the scenario. The other pairs listen in, until the moment arrives for them to perform themselves, and each conversational exchange is recorded by the instructor at the console. Subsequently, this recording is replayed and analyzed in detail. A skillful manipulation of the "intercom" switches on the console is necessary for the maintenance of dramatic continuity. The sound of a telephone ringing can be transmitted from one of the master recorders as a cue to the start of each conversation.

But it is the older learner's attitude to the nature of language that forms the chief encumbrance perhaps. The young learner is apt to regard speaking as a more important, or at least more thrilling, activity than writing. For him, fluency in speech is a worthwhile target, whereas slipshod writing is something that only schoolteachers get worried about. With the older learner, this attitude is reversed. After years at his office desk, the businessman has been conditioned to regard the written word as sacred, with the result that, in a course devoted solely to spoken English, he is constantly tempted to convert everything he hears into its written equivalent. This propensity manifests itself in an itching desire to write down sentences in a notebook, to know how words are spelled, and even to ask for a transcript of the complete drills and other material to take home with him at the end of the course. The only way to defeat this fussy preoccupation with written forms is to stress persistently at the beginning of the course that writing is a mere symbolization of speech and that, to paraphrase Hall,[4] it is sounds issuing from the lips that are important, not the scratching of ballpoints on the booth desk.

Evaluation of Success

Such problems as these are likely to arise during the first day or two, but, although they seldom disappear entirely, they quickly recede as the course gathers momentum and participants begin to understand the principles behind the system. Then the rate of learning and improvement accelerates. By the end of the first week, a considerable increase in fluency is noticeable. The debates at the end of the afternoons, for example, show how members who were able to express themselves only in halting English on the first day have managed not only to overcome the shyness barrier, but also to give their sentences proper idiomatic shape, to eradicate their former mistakes in pronunciation, and to make confident use of their vocabulary. The second week is always a period of consolidation and refinement. They are now aware of their individual shortcomings and, often gripped by an obsessive urge to achieve perfection (their last opportunity!), strive to derive every ounce of profit from a system which originally aroused their misgivings, but to which they now feel entirely reconciled.

P. D. Strevens has declared that, broadly speaking, the greater the intensity of teaching, the more effective and rapid the learning. Maximum intensity should always be sought for adults. . . . One important aspect of intensive teaching is that it offers many fewer opportunities for forgetting."[5] It is obvious that results in any given group will vary, but the writer's experience substantiates Strevens' belief and has shown how an extremely intensive, residential course, which makes it possible for the businessman to immerse himself completely in a spoken language, is capable of yielding astonishing results: indeed, the achievement of near-native proficiency. The parallel courses in French organized by the Netherlands School of Business have demonstrated similarly the advantages of the intensive course system in teaching professional groups. At the end of every course, the organizers are always asked to express the degree of improvement in the form of a percentage. This they cannot do. They can, however, provide a convincing answer by playing parts of the long-forgotten recordings made during the admission tests and contrasting them with samples of the members' final efforts.

[4] Robert A. Hall, Jr., *Leave Your Language Alone!*, Ithaca, New York: Linguistica, 1950, p. 50.

[5] Peter D. Strevens, "The Teaching of Foreign Languages to Adults: The Problem in Perspective" in *Papers in Language and Language Teaching*, London: Oxford University Press, 1965. p. 39.